

Eight

Evening, June 2029

“It’s criminal that you’re not behind bars. Mass genocide. You wiped out an entire people... the entire Central American bloc of nations is effectively a morgue, and yet here you are... unscathed.” Gary gave a disappointing whistle, “I sent your girlfriend everything she needed to put you away, but it’s obvious that she no longer serves the US constitution, its people, or its interests.” Gary stood directly behind Zachary, glaring at the stiff swirl of golden hair covering his bald spot. “No, it’s your interests she serves.”

Although it wasn’t a voice Zachary often heard, he instantly recognized it. Seated with a cigar in one hand and a cognac in the other, he didn’t turn to acknowledge the uninvited guest. His eyes concentrated on the amber liquid in his glass as he wondered how Gary got passed his security, “So the mysterious package came from you.” A split second of regret flashed across his face. “I had been so sure it came from Derick.” If he had been facing Gary he would have seen his incredulous shake of the head. “Well, it’s of no consequence. He wasn’t very good at following orders.”

Gary gave a heartbreaking wince. *Wasn’t*, he thought to himself, *in the past tense. Dammit!* A pang of anger punched

him in the gut and he debated pulling the trigger of the gun he had pointed at the back of Zachary's head. It was a difficult task to remind himself that he needed him alive; He, and the world, if they were going to roll back climate change, needed to know where he was keeping Kenneth Montes and the artificial respiration technology he developed.

Artificial respirators were the promise that would liberate people from the SunSafes, the very SunSafes Zachary was banking on to consolidate his grip on power. The artificial respirators were essentially carbon converters, like trees, their task was to suck the carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and convert it to oxygen. With time, and if they functioned as promised, they could reverse the effects of global warming.

Leaning forward and making a show of wanting to get comfortable, Zachary placed his cognac and cigar down on the table and casually leaned back, reaching for his coat pockets.

“Not a good idea.” Gary warned. “Keep those hands where I can see them.”

Zachary cursed under his breath and placed his hands over his knees.

“Atta boy.” Gary said, as he came around from behind and took the lounge chair next to him. “Nice view.” It came off as condescending, but Gary meant it. They were in the newly built SF SunSafe, on the rooftop of The One Building, where the wealthiest one percent of the global population kept their residence.

From what Gary understood, via information received from Steven and Yesenia, the income graph looked like a downward sloping line from there, with the furthest most western buildings housing the poorest of the SunSafe residents. And they were the lucky ones. An entire swath of the population, the most indigent, had yet to be admitted to the SunSafe.

Gary looked beyond the SunSafe, as if he could see the distant darkness, where his Lazador members were out, working in the redlined impecunious neighborhoods, sharing essential skills to help them survive the harsh weather events and solar radiation. They recommended going nocturnal and encouraged neighborhoods to connect their homes using tunnels, creating an underground network. They also taught them to utilize abandoned office buildings, because they tended to be air conditioned, core them out and turn them into greenhouses.

“This is supposed to be the most secure building on the planet, and yet here you are.” Zachary said, taking his cognac and cigar back from the table. “Tell me,” Gary leveled him with an annoyed look that he ignored, “how is it that you are able to track me and bypass my security; meanwhile, my imbecile security can’t get within a mile of you without you knowing?” From his dirty hiking boots, to his well-worn blue jeans, to his Grey T-shirt, Gary watched as Zachary’s eyes appraised him, traveling from bottom up, until they stopped on his.

“You done?”

“You have someone inside my organization.” Zachary wasn’t asking. He was stating a fact he suddenly understood to be true.

There had been someone on the inside, Derick. Gary felt his anger rising to the surface.

“Who is it?” He asked, knowing Gary would never actually say, but he got what he wanted from the question. Gary’s eyes, although the rest of his face gave nothing away, his eyes confirmed there was someone. “Well,” he sat back again, clearly disappointed, “I obviously need a more competent security team.”

Gary’s concrete expression temporarily broke to allow for a mocking grin. “Don’t bother replacing your security, you’re wasting your time and money. I’ll just get passed it again.” Without Derick, he wasn’t sure he could, but he wanted to sew doubt in Zachary’s mind.

Instead of responding, Zachary took a swig of his cognac and washed down his ire. If he hadn’t spotted the gun in Gary’s pocket he would have already walked away and let his security deal with him, but he knew that Gary, an ex-FBI field agent, would not hesitate to pull the trigger... especially on him.

As Zachary contemplated his predicament, Gary glanced at the idle wait staff who lined the wall like ball boys and girls at a tennis tournament. There was something off about them. They didn’t blink or seem to breathe. Then, as Zachary tilted the glass and the last bit of its content fell into his mouth, the nearest one literally came to life. Within the span of twenty

seconds, before the empty glass touched the table, it had been replaced.

Amused, Gary looked between the robot with jet-black hair, perfectly smooth honeyed skin, and big bright auburn eyes, and Zachary's fresh glass. "You're a conundrum, you know. You build robots to replace the humans, and yet you make them look like the very thing you replaced. Why bother?"

As if knowing that he was wasting his time explaining his logic to someone that would never understand, he repeated the spiel he gave to his investors. "No unions, no employee benefits, no overtime pay, no disability leave, they never age... shall I go on?" He brought the cigar to his mouth and took a couple of puffs, temporarily floating a puff of smoke between them.

Zachary crossed his legs. The tip of his custom made, cognac colored leather shoes thumped the table, causing some of his drink to splat on his dark blue denim pants. Instantly, a humanoid, one with golden hair, pale skin, and deep blue eyes, came to life and approached with a towel before Zachary raised a hand and stopped it in its tracks. "Sleep," he commanded.

The humanoid stopped, took a step back, brought its hands to its sides, dropped its head, and went to sleep.

Pleased with the unanticipated exhibition Gary received, Zachary smiled and said "They're better than humans... and, my decision to automate has made my investors billions in profits."

“And in the process, you’ve made yourself the wealthiest man on the planet... but what about everyone *out there*. Beyond the walls of the SunSafe?”

A confused looked landed and parked itself on Zachary’s face.

Gary shook his head. “What about all of the people you have no intention of letting into your SunSafes. What’s going to become of them?”

Zachary’s shocked expression confirmed what he had already known, that nobody was supposed to know about that.

“That’s a false narrative... that accusation of redlining. I’m tired of hearing it!” Zachary sat forward, balled his right fist and said, “Admittance to the SunSafe is based on a lottery. We had to do it that way so that we didn’t have a sudden influx of residents overwhelming out infrastructure. As people settle in, we’ll draw more numbers.”

“You should have been in politics.” Gary disgustedly replied.

Zachary gave an unconcerned shrug and sipped his cognac as his gaze reached the other buildings, those adjacent to The One Building, with their brightly lit, interconnecting skywalks. To his eyes they were beautiful, the way they broke the darkness surrounding them. He wasn’t about to let the rift raft in to destroy his work of art.

As Zachary stared off, into the distance, Gary sized him up.

“Tell me something. If people have no jobs, then they don’t have an income, which only means that they can’t buy your

products. And then what? You can't make a profit if you don't have an income."

Zachary sat, weighing Gary with his eyes, as if he was debating sharing a secret with him. Eventually he said, "That's when you know we've gone full circle. At that point, the only solution would be to become a feudal society. Hell, we're nearly there already."

Gary's head gave an incredulous jerk, "A feudal society?" Then, as if it made sense to him he said, "Let me guess, you'd be a land holding lord."

"Of course not. I'd be *the* land holding lord." Sinking back, into his chair, he stared Gary in the eye and reiterated, "I would be King."

As ridiculous as Zachary sounded, in the context of the times they were living in, with high unemployment, high poverty, and high government bankruptcy rates, it was hard not to take Zachary seriously. Gary smirked and looked around the rooftop, seeing, for the first time that evening, that the other usually entitled and implacable billionaires knew their place in the hierarchy, which placed every one of them somewhere below Zachary.

Suddenly, he knew that it was only a matter of time before Zachary's feudalism was realized.

"Now I see why the SunSafes are so important to you, more important than the wellbeing of the people. *This* is sort of a practice go for you... isn't it? It's like your proxy fiefdom, where *you* wield the power."

Close, but not quite, Zachary thought. There were still too many potential threats in the SunSafes, threats that wanted nothing more than to wrestle his power away.

“Why are you here?” Zachary demanded, tired of the game.

“I need you to come with me.”

Zachary gave a boisterous laugh and cried, “And if I don’t, you can’t force me.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You look as if you bleed red, just like the rest of us.” Gary pulled out part of the gun from his pocket, “You may not be walking out on your own, but you’ll be coming with me.”

Zachary shrugged and said, “You can’t harm me. Not physically, not politically, and certainly not economically. *I am*, by all definitions, *too big to fail*. Do you know what happens when you’re too big to fail?”

“You lose your moral integrity? Oh, wait, you never had any to begin with.”

Ignoring his dig, he explained, “People like you have no choice but to get out of my way and ensure my success. If I go down, the whole ship goes down.”

Anger shot through Gary like a bolt of lightning. As far as he could tell, the only people on the ship were the handful of billionaires that lived in The One building. The rest of the populations were left to pile on top of a single life jacket to keep from drowning.

“You sad sod. The only reason you’re still breathing right now is because I need to know what you’ve done with Kenneth

Montes and his artificial respiration technology. I know that you and your girlfriend shut him down, and now he and his technology are missing.”

Zachary’s smile disappeared. “Kenneth Montes is gone? What a shame. I really liked him.”

“Sure you did.” From where he sat, people could be seen milling about on skywalks, lobbies, and rooftops. And, for a minute, he forgot that the people in these communities were subjugated to the whims of those in power.

“You should come work for me,” Zachary said, interrupting Gary’s thoughts. “Take your rightful place as director of the Amalgamated Clandestine Services. Now that Derick’s gone your input would be invaluable.”

The sanctioned demise of Derick, a retired fellow FBI Field Agent, made his blood boil. *You will pay for that.* And then, he recalled that Zachary had always been the type to try and bribe his enemies into his corner. He’d known Zachary since they were boys growing up in Santa Rosa, California. His dad would say that Zachary was the way he was because life made him that way: manipulative, calculating, and conniving.

Zachary came from a broken home, his father was a mean old bad man that liked to take out his aggressions on his son. Every so often, a frightened eleven-year-old Zachary would knock on sixteen-year-old Gary’s bedroom window seeking shelter because his father had beaten him and locked him out.

Gary’s mother used to try and overcompensate for Zachary’s misfortunes by offering to keep him over. But after

she died, that promptly stopped. Gary went off to college and the boys lost touch.

An entire decade had passed before they saw each other again. Gary was working on a case to expose a couple of congressmen who were on the take. He was in D.C. at a bar, unwinding, when the bartender placed a tumbler of whisky before him, compliments of the guy at the end of the bar. When he looked over he saw Zachary, sitting there, holding up his glass. He was grinning from ear to ear as if he had found his long lost brother.

That was then and this is now, Gary thought to himself and said, “What’s happened to you, Zack?” Gary glanced over the million dollar watch on Zachary’s wrist. “You know, I paid your mother a visit not too long ago. Did you know that she’s living in a piss smelling trailer with a potted toilet in the front yard?” He shook his head. “She spends the hot days in a dig out under her trailer and surfaces at night.”

“Don’t care. She walked out on me and left me as my father’s punching bag.”

“She walked out under duress. Your father put a gun to her head and threatened to kill you both if she ever came back.”

He’d touched a nerve. Zachary was doing that thing with his mouth, where he bites the tip of his tongue repeatedly until it bleeds. He used to do it when he was a kid to try and hide his temper from others.

“You have no soul.”

Zachary didn’t seem bothered by it. He’d been called worse.

“Tell me something.” Gary’s eyes were lingering over Zachary’s watch again. “How does a boy who grew up dependent on welfare condemn others for needing it?”

Instinctively, Zachary took his drink and flung it at Gary. It stung when it hit his eyes, but Gary didn’t flinch. Instead, he nonchalantly took his handkerchief out of his pant pocket and dabbed his eyes, letting the rest run off his face.

“Tsk-tsk. That temper of yours. I see you still haven’t learned to control it. How’s the tongue?”

“I’ve grown tired of our conversation,” he said and stood to leave, briefly placing his hands in his pockets.

“Sit down and put your hands back where I can see them. We’ll be leaving together.”

And then he noticed it. Something had changed. The glimmer had returned in Zachary’s eyes. Gary kept his gun pointed at Zachary and, with his free hand, he reached and pulled his fisted hand towards him. Inside he found a panic button, exactly like the one the President of the United States carries.

Disgusted that he had such a privileged device in his possession, he struck Zachary across the face with the butt of his gun. As cowardly Zachary dramatically collapsed onto the floor and began pleading for mercy.

From his periphery, Gary spied the mobile unit of uniformed men exiting the elevator. With one glance he counted four and instantly knew they were ex-military types.

“I think it’s time for you to go.” Zachary said, spying the same men and regaining his courage.

Gary debated forcing Zachary to move at gunpoint, but knew he would only resist, intentionally slowing him down until he was captured. Kicking himself for having wasted so much time, he took the gas lamp off the table and threw it into the silk curtains that partitioned Zachary off from the lesser billionaires.

The flames caught instantly and panic ensued. A blob of extremely well dressed people began to run towards the exits, creating a moving obstacle for the security team to have to cut through. Meanwhile, Gary ran in the opposite direction, across the rooftop, towards the opposite edge. He had resisted Jim and Clarence’s demand that he bring backup, but had thankfully accepted their insistence on a backup exit plan.

Hanging off the side of the building, in what amounted to a window washing platform and equipment, he found a jet-suit that Steven stashed for him earlier that day.

With a silent thank you to the night’s sky above, he began to strap it on. As he was finishing up, he heard a gunshot and felt a burning sensation in his right calf that took his leg from under him, dropping him to the ground with a groan.

His gun was out but he couldn’t see the shooter through the panicked mob.

Dammit!

A piece of the burning silk had somehow flown onto the roof of the lounge area and was now engulfed in flames. The

ensuing panic created a bottleneck of people at the two rooftop exits, while others could be seen running around, looking for alternatives. Amongst that latter group were the four very large, muscular men with their guns drawn running towards him.

Trying to avoid shooting an innocent bystander, he shot up into the air, causing the four men to scatter, and allowing him a small reprieve to quickly limp his way behind an air vent. From there, he got a clear shot and took it. The target seemed to stop cold, mid-stride, and fell backwards—bullseye.

As the remaining three took cover, Gary shot out the light near his position, making it harder for his enemies to spot him.

More shots were fired and a couple of them whizzed by, one was so close to his head that he heard it cut through the air as it zipped by. Taking a couple of his own shots, he dropped onto his stomach and slowly backed away from the vent, towards the building's ledge. From there, he spotted a guy trying to conceal his position by squatting behind a tent wall. He was giving orders with hand signals, unaware that the light behind him was projecting his shadow against the blue curtain. Two shots and the guy's shadow collapsed into a lump on the ground.

The sound of gunshots rang out and he felt one pierce his shoulder. Suddenly short of breath, he knew that it was imperative that he make his move or risk going into shock right there. As a rush of adrenaline coursed through his body, he reached for the gun strapped to his wounded leg's ankle.

Fighting the pain to stay conscious, and with both guns blazing, he stood up, sprinted and jumped off the ledge.